



RADIO BEFORE ROCK AND ROLL

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did radio influence American life in the years before the birth of Rock and Roll?

OVERVIEW

From its birth in 1920 to the rise of television in the early 1950s, commercial radio played a central role in American life. For much of this era, the radio itself held an honored place in the center of the home. Entire families would gather around it to hear important news events, listen to live music, or catch the latest installment of a hit drama or comedy series such as *The Lone Ranger* or *Amos 'n Andy*.



But by the early 1950s, technological shifts—most notably the introduction of television into the family living room—heralded significant changes in the American people’s relationship with radio. The rise of smaller, portable radios meant that individuals could now listen virtually any time or place. The growing popularity of television rendered radio drama and comedy series nearly obsolete; listeners were less satisfied with merely listening to stories on radio when they could see them unfold before their eyes on television.

But far from disappearing from American life, as some predicted, radio instead reinvented itself in the early 1950s. Recorded popular music would come to play an increasingly central role in radio programming over the next two decades, as opposed to the live performances that dominated the airwaves in the decades prior. As the major networks, such as NBC and CBS, shifted their attention from radio to television, radio stations came more and more under local control, allowing for greater experimentation and creativity in programming. One such local owner, Todd Storz of WKOH in Omaha, Nebraska, pioneered a new format in which listeners could hear recordings of their favorite songs over and over again, paving the way for what would soon become known as “Top 40” radio. Some stations began playing a broader range of recorded music, including some that emphasized Rhythm and Blues performed by African-American artists. These changes set the stage for radio to play a central role in the Rock and Roll explosion of the late 1950s.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The changing nature and influence of radio on American life in successive eras, from the 1920s through the early 1950s
- How radio helped create a “mass culture” in American society
- How commercial radio transformed itself after the rise of television from a medium that emphasized dramatic and comedy series to one that increasingly centered around music-based programming

2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Compare and contrast the style and influence of commercial radio in successive eras in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s.
- Common Core: Students will integrate and evaluate primary source materials on one of the decades as group work and prepare an oral and visual presentation for the class. (CCSS Reading 7; CCSS Speaking and Listening 4.)
- Common Core: Students will select, organize, and analyze primary audio and visual sources and informational text to write an informative essay discussing the impact of the radio on American society. (CCSS Writing 2; CCSS Writing 4).

ACTIVITIES

HOMWORK PREPARATION:

(Recommended)

Ask students to interview a family member or neighbor over the age of 65 about his or her memories of radio as s/he was growing up. Students should ask the following questions and record answers in their notebooks:

- Approximately how old is the person? (Based on this information, try to identify the decade in which s/he grew up.
- How often did the person listen to radio?
- What did s/he generally listen to? Music? News? Sports? Dramas? Something else?
- When and where did s/he tend to listen?
- Does s/he have any specific memories of listening to radio that stand out?
- Overall, how important was radio to his/her life while growing up?

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

1. On a sheet of paper, ask students to write down the amount of time (in minutes or hours) they spend each day listening to radio.

2. Share sample responses.

3. Discuss:

- On average, do students listen to radio a lot, a little, or not at all?
- What do students listen to on the radio? Music? Sports? News? Talk? Something else?
- Do they generally listen to AM, FM, streaming, or satellite radio?
- Where do they listen?
- When do they listen?
- Do they listen alone, or with others?
- How does listening to something on radio differ from watching it on television or the Internet?
- Overall, do they feel radio plays a significant role in their lives? Why or why not?

4. If students have completed the homework assignment (above), discuss the following:

- How do their own answers differ from the answers given by the person they interviewed? (Be sure to elicit specific information about the age of the person interviewed and the decade in which s/he grew up.)
- Overall, did radio seem to play a bigger part in the lives of the adults they interviewed than in their own lives? Why do they think this might be the case?

5. If students have not completed the homework assignment, explain that radio played a central role in the lives of many individuals who grew up in the 1930s through the 1950s, and discuss:

- Why might this be the case? What other news and entertainment options are available today that were not available to people growing up in those decades?
- How do students imagine their lives might be different if they had to rely on radio as a main source of information and entertainment? How might their perception of the world be different if this were the case?

PROCEDURE:

1. Divide students into groups of 3-5.
Distribute Handout 1: An Overview of the Early History of Radio to all groups.
2. Ask a student volunteer to read the handout aloud. Other students should follow along, underlining key words and terms.
3. Discuss with the class as a whole:
 - When did radio first become an important part of American life?
 - What is commercial radio? What kinds of programs did it offer in the early days?
 - Why did radio become so popular so quickly? What did it offer?
 - When did the popularity of radio begin to decline and why?
4. Explain that in this activity, each group will investigate the importance of radio to American life in the years leading up to the birth of Rock and Roll and report its findings to the rest of the class. The four groups are (instructors should duplicate groups in order to accommodate overall class size):
 - A. Early Radio in the 1920s.
 - Handout for group 1
 - Video: Earl Burtnett and His Biltmore Hotel Orchestra
 - Video: Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, “Kiss Your Little Baby Goodnight”
 - B. The Golden Age of Radio in the 1930s
 - Handout for group 2
 - Video: “Back of the Mike”
 - Video: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Fireside Chat
 - Video: “War of the Worlds”
 - C. Radio During World War II
 - Handout for group 3
 - Video: Edward R. Murrow in London
 - Video: Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Day of Infamy” Speech
 - Video: “You Can’t Do Business with Hitler”
 - D. Radio in the Late 1940s and Early 1950s
 - Handout for group 4
 - Video: “The Lone Ranger on Radio and TV”
 - Video: Elmore James, “Dust My Broom”
5. Each group will examine a series of readings, pictures, and videos relating to its time period in order to answer the following questions:
 - Why was radio important to American citizens during this period?
 - What were some of the key features of radio and radio programming during this period?
 - When and where did people listen to radio during this period?
6. Distribute the appropriate packet of readings and resources to each group.
7. Optional: If students have access to the Internet, ask them to identify at least one additional online resource relating to radio in the period they are studying. They will use this resource to support their overall findings.
8. Allow each group sufficient time to review its document set and watch the videos listed in the handout.
9. Each group should then work to prepare a short presentation (no more than five minutes) to the class on the period it has studied, answering the questions listed above, and including at least one short

PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

- sample of a radio broadcast from that era.
10. Groups will work together to decide on an appropriate format for their presentation. Students should be encouraged to create something original that reflects the subject matter at hand. (For example, they might perform a live radio broadcast in the style of the era they have studied.)

SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

1. Have each group make its presentation to the class. Instruct students to take notes highlighting key points of the other groups' presentations.
2. After all groups have made their presentations, discuss the following:
 - How did radio programming change over time?
 - Overall, how significant a role did radio play in American life and culture during this era?
 - How did the rise of television impact radio?
 - How do you think the changes to radio in the late 1940s and early 1950s helped to pave the way for the rise of Rock and Roll?

WRITING PROMPT:

Describe the impact of radio on American society from 1920 to the early 1950s. Cite specific evidence from this lesson and address the following:

- How did radio change the way Americans received information and their sources of entertainment?
- How did radio influence the ways Americans lived?
- Why did radio play such a significant role in this era?

EXTENSIONS:

Using the information discussed in this lesson, ask students to create a timeline of radio history from the 1920s to the early 1950s.

Ask students to research and report on the introduction and early development of radio in your community. Students may be able to find information at a local historical society, and may also find it helpful to research entertainment sections of local newspapers of the period, which may have published daily radio broadcast schedules. It may also be helpful for students to interview older residents who may have personal memories of early radio in the community. Student research should address such questions as:

- What was the first radio station in your town/city? If there wasn't one, what stations did people in your

EXTENSIONS: (CONTINUED)

town/city listen to in the 1920s—1950s?

- When and how did other radio stations come into being?
- Who were some of the important radio personalities in the community?
- What was the influence of local radio stations on local history and culture?
- How did the influence of radio in this era compare to the influence of the Internet on American society in recent years?

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Reading Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 for Literature and Informational Text

Reading 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

College and Career Readiness Writing Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects

Writing 2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Writing 4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 6-12

Speaking and Listening 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 8: Science, Technology and Society

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

Core Music Standard: Responding

Select: Choose music appropriate for a specific purpose or context.

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

Core Music Standard: Connecting

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- Earl Burtnett and His Biltmore Hotel Orchestra (1928)
- The Jam Handy Organization – Back of the Mike (1938)
- Franklin D. Roosevelt – Fireside Chat (1933)
- Edward R. Murrow – Murrow in London (1940)
- The Mercury Theatre on the Air – War of the Worlds (1938)
- Franklin D. Roosevelt – “Day of Infamy” Speech (1941)
- Elmore James – Dust My Broom (1951)
- Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll – Kiss Your Little Baby Goodnight (1926)
- Various – The Lone Ranger – Radio and TV Opening Sequences
- United States Office of War Information – You Can’t Do Business With Hitler (1942)

HANDOUTS

- Group Four
- Group One
- Group Three
- Group Two